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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: MEET THE CANDIDATES

REF: PODGORICA 013 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The deadline for registration for Montenegro's presidential election is March 17, but the identities of the four leading candidates have been clear for some time. (The first round of the election will be April 6, with an if-needed second round on April 20). The contenders are incumbent President Vujanovic of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, Nebojsa Medojevic of the centrist Movement for Change, Andrija Mandic of the Serbian People's Party, and Srdjan Milic of the Socialist People's Party. A recent poll shows President Vujanovic potentially within reach of a first round victory, with Medojevic and Mandic vying for second place. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Four candidates have gathered the required 7,266 signatures (1.5 percent of voters) to register for the April 6 presidential elections. (Note: Two independents are still attempting to gather signatures. One, Dragan Hajdukovic, a physicist living in Switzerland, received more than four percent of the vote in the 2003 presidential election, but should not be a factor in this race even if he manages to register. The other independent, Dragic Bulatovic, is an unemployed worker.) The four contenders are:

President Filip Vujanovic

¶3. (SBU) The incumbent President, 54, represents the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). A graduate of the Belgrade Law Faculty, he served as Minister of Justice and then Interior from 1993 to 1998 and was Prime Minister from 1998 until 2002, when he became Speaker of Parliament. Vujanovic was elected President in May 2003 with 64 percent of the vote.

¶4. (SBU) Vujanovic's incumbency did not prevent a noisy campaign to nominate DPS leader Milo Djukanovic for the presidency, as DPS supporters worried that the low key Vujanovic lacks the charisma and nationalist credentials to mobilize the party's base. Vujanovic is no lightweight, however: he has the lowest negative ratings of any of the four candidates and a relatively clean image. His support for the Serbian Orthodox Church also makes him less objectionable for Montenegro's large Serb community. Vujanovic has also made regular efforts to reach out

to the ethnic Albanian community in Montenegro. Finally, Djukanovic's election as PM has reassured the DPS base, and the backing of the party's formidable political and patronage machine makes Vujanovic the overwhelming frontrunner.

Nebojsa Medojevic, Movement for Change (PzP)

¶5. (SBU) Medojevic, now 42, graduated with a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Montenegro in 1991 and subsequently worked as a consultant for the GoM's Agency for Restructuring and Foreign Investments. He co-founded the "Group for Change" NGO in 2002 to lobby for economic and democratic reforms. In 2006, Medojevic turned the NGO into a political party, the Movement for Change (PzP). Competing for the first time in the September 2006 parliamentary election, the PzP received 13 percent of the vote, making the new party the second largest in Parliament (after the PM's DPS).

¶6. (SBU) The ambitious and charismatic Medojevic appeals to moderates weary of the DPS stranglehold on political power. His anti-DPS electoral campaign focuses on economic issues and corruption. His chief challenge is that he lacks a set electorate and party structure (he was the last of the four contenders to submit signatures despite being the first to declare). He also tends to pander and is hard to pin down on controversial issues, including Kosovo and NATO. Ironically, his one principled stand -- support for the new Constitution -- enabled opposition rivals to cast him as a traitor, and could hurt him with pro-Serb voters, particularly if he makes it to the second round.

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Andrija Mandic, Serbian People's Party (SNS)

¶7. (SBU) Mandic, 43, heads both the SNS, Montenegro's largest pro-Serb party, and the Serbian List political alliance. He has a degree in metallurgy from the University of Podgorica. After graduation, he founded a company which designed, produced, and installed aluminum molding. Mandic joined the SNS in 1997 and served as Deputy Minister of Economy of the FRY from 2000 to ¶2001.

¶8. (SBU) Mandic has a stable and committed electorate of anti-independence Serbs. This is also a weakness, since his strident rhetoric and identification with Serb issues sharply limits his appeal beyond his base. His critics accuse him of grandstanding and serving Belgrade's interests, and polls give him the highest negative ratings of the four candidates. (Note: He comes across as pragmatic and opportunistic in meetings, where he takes pains to convey that he values his relationship with the USG despite frequent critical public positions.) Mandic is hoping Kosovo will energize his campaign; he organized an anti-Kosovo independence rally which brought as many as 10,000 peaceful protestors to Podgorica. (Note: Mandic assured us he would not target our Embassy, and kept his word.)

Srdjan Milic, Socialist People's Party (SNP)

¶9. (SBU) Milic, 42, graduated from the Faculty of Foreign Trade and Tourism in Dubrovnik and worked in the tourism industry for most of the 1980s and 1990s. He joined the SNP in 1998 and was elected to the Montenegrin Parliament in 2002. He was elected head of his party in November 2006 in a general shake-up intended to stem the party's slide in the polls (Note: The SNP declined in support from 20.4 percent in 2002 to 8.2 percent in 2006).

¶10. (SBU) Milic has tried to reinvent the heavily Serb, anti-independence SNP into a multi-ethnic, civic party, but has faced resistance from the SNP's conservative wing and has found his electorate squeezed by the PzP and SNS. He was a reluctant presidential candidate, delaying committing in the hopes that an independent, joint opposition candidate would emerge. The understated Milic is often overshadowed by the more voluble Mandic and Medojevic, but benefits from a still-strong party structure (he was the first candidate to gather the required signatures despite being the last to declare). He hopes to present himself as a moderate alternative to Mandic and a stronger oppositionist than Medojevic. Interestingly, Milic claims to be an advocate of NATO membership for Montenegro. (Note: The latest polls suggest the SNP has gained back some of the votes it lost to PzP in the last election, likely due to Medojevic's support for the new Constitution).

What The Polls Say

¶11. (U) The most recent poll from the respected CEDEM think tank surveyed 1,000 Montenegrins from February 15 - 20. According to the poll (which had a margin of error of 1.5 percent), 49.5 percent of likely voters would cast their ballots for Vujanovic, 21.2 percent for Medojevic, 14.8 percent for Mandic, and 9.9 percent for Milic. 4.6 percent of respondents would vote for none of the above, and the expected turnout for the election's first round was 71.1 percent.

¶12. (U) Should the election go to a second round (if no candidate won more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round), voter turnout would fall to 62.1 percent. Vujanovic would beat Medojevic by a margin of 63.2 percent to 36.8 percent, and would beat Mandic 68.5 percent to 31.5 percent. The poll did not offer a Vujanovic - Milic match-up. Should

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Medojevic face off against Mandic, however, the former would beat the latter 67.3 percent to 32.7 percent.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The main drama at this point is whether Vujanovic can win a first round victory, and if not, whether it will be Medojevic or Mandic (since at this point Milic is running a clear fourth) to lead the opposition in the second round. Septel will discuss this election's political implications for

Montenegro.
MOORE